

'God is on our side': When faith is used to justify conquest

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Two books look to the past to examine the intersection of religion and imperialism.

By Tom D'Evelyn

Two recent histories demonstrate that the use of religion to justify imperial design is nothing new - it has been with us for centuries. And yet, in *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in the New World*, J.H. Elliott, Regius professor emeritus of modern history at Oxford University, argues that the "most effective grave-diggers of empires are usually the imperialists themselves." Elliott tests his epigram with a meticulous comparison of Spain and Britain in colonial America.

As preparation for the American adventure, England drew on its experience with Catholic Ireland and Spain on its experience with the Moors. With this in mind, Elliott bases his comparisons on such universals as nature and nurture, authority and resistance, and empire and identity.

The variable of time allowed England to learn from the earlier efforts of Spain, not so much from its mistakes (there was very little detailed knowledge) but from its glory. In one of the epigrams that make the book sparkle, Elliott says "Empire calls forth empire" as he shows how "Spain served as stimulus, exemplar, and sometimes as warning...." for Britain.

Despite religious differences, both drew on biblical history for inspiration. For both, America was "sacred space." Spain considered the conversion of the native Americans a religious duty (even a duty to the natives themselves). England entertained millennial dreams. Even Thomas Paine argued, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Both felt they had Providence on their side. Elliott's mastery of Spanish materials is especially impressive and allows him to show how Spanish America "was large enough to provide the setting for a variety of holy experiments."

For both mother countries, the children proved rebellious. New identities were forged in the violence of revolution. Elliott's pages on Simon Bolivar, the liberator of the southern continent, point to the human individual as the chief variable. It is refreshing to read, towards the end of this brilliant, compelling book, that in the British colonies "a distinctively American identity" was not so much the cause of revolution as the result.

Elliott is an Oxford don; Stephen O'Shea is an independent historian. In his new book, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World*, O'Shea covers the interactions between Islam and Christianity spanning the Middle Ages. Each chapter focuses on one of seven battles from Syria to Spain, including the crusades, and all accounts teem with legendary incident.

"Sea of Faith" is a tour de force - literally. Complex battle maneuvers are made clear; we feel the dread and ecstasy of mortal combat. Holy rage knows no limits for Muslim and Christian alike. Extended narratives and character

portraits often close on a sharp point of judgment. Of an early Byzantine emperor, he writes, "Heraclius was reaping what he had sown with his years of cruelty and revenge."

O'Shea is a master of rhetoric in the old sense: the conveyance, through patterned language, of discriminations and qualifications. As in his previous books, he uses eyewitness descriptions to brilliant effect. (It should be gratefully noted that supporting materials include maps and photographs, a glossary and a descriptive list of names.) Finally, his vocabulary is rich with special terms that short-circuit our preconceptions. For example, *convivencia*, the Spanish word for "intelligent coexistence," which, under Muslim rule, identified civilized oases in a murderous world.

"Sea of Faith" is a beautiful, necessary book, punctuated with passages of dark, luminous, symbolic power. If, as it appears, we have entered a new "dark ages," only by facing the worst about what seems to offer hope to believers can we forge new hopes - tolerant places where *convivencia*, as embodied in this superb book, flourishes once again.

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